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Sandinistas snuffing out Nicaragua's Indian culture

By Cord Meyer

WASHINGTON
BEHIND LAST WEEK'S admission by the Sandinista regime that it had to forcibly relocate 10,000 Miskito Indians from their native villages in northeast Nicaragua lies a tragic and cautionary tale of two years of ideologically-motivated brutality.

In a remarkable 20-page appeal to the Reagan administration and to all "organizations that claim to defend democracy," the young and charismatic leader of the more than 100,000 Miskitos, Stedman Fagoth, from his exile base in Honduras, has spelled out how the Sandinistas are committing a kind of cultural genocide against this proud Indian tribe that once ruled the Atlantic Coast of Central America.

Enjoying independence under their own king as a British protectorate until late in the last century, the Miskitos live in more than 250 self-governing communities, each with its Council of Elders and with land owned in common. Speaking their native language and English, they have long been devout, primarily Protestant Christians, and during the years of the Somoza dictatorship they were left alone to pursue their traditional ways by the Spanish-speaking, more populous Western part of the country.

Largely untouched by the Nicaraguan civil war, the Miskitos welcomed the Sandinistas when they first arrived after their victory in Managua in July '79. But the honeymoon didn't last long. As Fagoth describes it, there soon began "an entire people's struggle to preserve their identity, their customs, their community-type lifestyle in the face of attempted ideological-political penetration by Marxist Sandinism."

In Fagoth's chronological record of what happened, the Sandinista administrators, complaining bitterly at the "ideological backwardness" of the Miskitos, tried to break the power of the Councils of Elders by imposing Sandinista Defense Committees to control food distribution. They declared the communally-owned land and forests to be state property and traditional leaders were arrested, never to be seen again.

Most disastrous of all in this first phase of the repression was the literacy campaign run by the Marxist priest from Managua, Fernando Cardenal. Refusing to adjust doctrinaire planning to reality, he imported hundreds of Cubans to teach the Indians to read and write in Spanish when most of them only knew English. In addition, the Cuban teachers so antagonized the Miskitos with their attempts to propagate anti-religious views that they eventually had to be withdrawn.

Taking one step back, as Lenin advised, the Sandinistas then recognized as the legitimate representative of the Indians a new organization, Misurasata. Fagoth was accepted as its leader and joined the Council of State in Managua as the popular defender of the Indian interest. In a long meeting on Dec. 19 with the top Sandinista leadership, he worked out an agreement to remove the Sandinista Defense Committees from the villages.

When this agreement and all subsequent attempts to reach a compromise broke down in the face of Sandinista determination to nationalize communal property and to impose their party cadres on the villages, demonstrations erupted in September 1980 in the major town of Bluefields and were only put down with the help of Cuban troops. In February '81 Fagoth and 33 other Indian leaders were arrested and thrown into jail in Managua on charges that they were "separatists, racists, imperialist reactionaries and CIA agents."

Promising to go to Bulgaria for Marxist indoctrination, Fagoth won his release from jail in two months and was warned by the interior minister, Tomas Borge, that the Sandinistas were prepared, if necessary, to eliminate the last Miskito in order to establish communism along the Atlantic Coast. Instead of going to Eastern Europe, Fagoth escaped to Honduras where he now leads a guerrilla movement of Miskito exiles in the border area.

In his profoundly-moving document, Fagoth describes a series of massacres committed by Sandinista troops last December in Miskito villages, listing by name many of those who were killed. Commenting on this savage display of ideological fanaticism, Fagoth remarks, "It reminds us of Stalin's arrival in Uzbekistan, populated by its native Uzbeks. History tells us that he had to massacre over 1 million in order to integrate them."

But these events described by Fagoth are not taking place in remote Central Asia but in America's backyard. The Sandinistas have successfully thrown a curtain of censorship around these dark and bloody deeds. No American TV network has been daring and ingenious enough to break into this zone of silence.

Stedman Fagoth will be visiting Washington within the next two weeks to tell his story in person to the administration and the congressional committees. Here, at least, the media have a chance to give him the coverage he so well deserves.